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SUBJECT: INTERNATIONAL ROMA DAY--RESPONSE TO ACTION REQUEST

REF: SECSTATE 29991

¶1. SUMMARY: On April 8 the National Minorities Council of the Public Defender's Office hosted a roundtable in honor of International Roma Day. Representatives from government ministries and NGOs discussed information contained in the 2008 European Center for Minority Issue (ECMI) report which estimates about 1500 Roma living in Georgia. Two members of the Roma community present at the roundtable recounted their personal difficulties in accessing health care, employment, education (estimates are that only 15% of Roma children attend school) and societal discrimination. ECMI evaluates the situation for Roma has significantly deteriorated since the era of the Soviet Union, as before there was a strong mechanism in place to force Romani to fill out official documents of births, deaths, pensions, etc, but now the recipient himself must initiate the request for these documents. Ministry of Justice officials present expressed their willingness to assist Roma in getting official documents, but stressed that Roma needed to officially apply.

Roma who still have outdated Soviet passports can get official documents, but those who were born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union face hardship as many were born at home without official documentation of their births.

End Summary.

Common Themes

¶2. (U) On April 8 Poloff attended a roundtable at the Public Defender's Office (PDO) where NGOs Human Rights and Information Center (HRIC), Child and the Environment and ECMI discussed the challenges facing Georgia's Roma population. ECMI's February 2008 report estimates the Roma population in Georgia as approximately 1500 people, with no one location holding a population of more than 300 people. Roma are found principally in the five regions of Georgia: Tbilisi (Samgori/Garabani/Leninovka); Kutaisi; Kobuleti (Adjara); Mukuzani/Telavi/Dedoplistsdkaro (Kakheti); and Sukhumi (Abkhazia). In recent years, Roma have returned to Sukhumi. Although Romans in each area differ in providence (Tbilisi--Roma/Moldovan; Kakheti--Ukrainian; Kobuleti--Russian; Kutaisi--Kurd/Azeri) all share common experiences:

- Poor housing conditions, often without running water
- High unemployment, with women and children earning money from begging or selling small items
- Low official registration rate due to births at home which are not recorded
- Low literacy and low rates of enrollment in school for children. Parents say that they cannot afford the books and materials to send their children to school, but others point out that Roma parents do not see the value in educating their children.

-- Lack of self-organization. Government officials point out that Roma shun interaction with them, but to improve their situation Roma must be more participatory determining their fate.

Official Documents

13. (U) According to the ECMI 2008 report, the possession of documents by Roma largely depends on the age of the respondent. For those born during the Soviet Union, the frequency of registered documents is extremely high as the USSR passed a series of measures to halt the nomadism of Roma across the Soviet Union. From 1956-1961 local authorities arbitrarily stopped Roma where they encountered them, registered them, handed out documents, and also arranged for the distribution of permanent housing. Many Roma in Georgia were put to work in both agricultural kolkhozes (collective farms) and factories. Children were sent to school to receive primary education and families were incorporated into state health care facilities. When the USSR collapsed, there was no longer strong enforcement of these policies and many Roma stopped filling out official documents of births, deaths, pensions, etc. Added to this, Romani children are born at home, not in a hospital or state health care facility, so extra steps are needed to acquire forms and pay for the registration process. Internally displaced Roma are almost completely without documents as they were forced to flee the regions during the civil wars in 1992-93, leaving most possessions behind. The impact of non-registration is significant: without proper registration citizens of Georgia cannot receive pensions, attend health care facilities, or enroll children in school. According to Civil Registry Agency (CRA) Officials at the roundtable, Roma who have out of date Soviet passports should face no difficulty in filing

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for and receiving Georgian documents. For those who have no official documents (were born at home for example and the births were not recorded) this presents a dilemma. CRA representatives said that they are willing to assist Roma in getting official documents, but Roma must officially apply, and few do. CRA officials claim that Roma are simply not interested.

Personal Stories

14. (U) Two Roma were present during the discussion and recounted their personal experiences. One, a male approximately 20 years old and university student in Tbilisi studying in the Tourism faculty, told of his personal experience of discrimination and stereotyping. (Comment: The group asked him how many other Roma were studying at university and he said he only knew of one other in Moscow. End Comment.) His family lived in Gatchiani far from schools and medical facilities. This isolation created problems with their integration. The other representative, Babasia Denisenko, a 59 year old woman with nine children who lives in Dedoplistsdkaro said that she and her family are all legally registered and she herself is still working. She had been unable to collect her pension, although she had inquired. She had taken a marshrutka (mini bus) in from her home two hours away to be at the PDO office. She said that her family lived in a very small dwelling which was a mere four rooms for the entire extended family. These two by virtue of their pursuit of education and formal jobs may not be indicative of the wider community here.

Comment

15. (SBU) Poloff experienced difficulty finding NGOs who have links with the Roma community. A representative from HRIC told Poloff that he has been trying to establish links with the Roma for some time, but the Roma were disinterested.

At the PDO, Poloff spoke personally with Denisenko and expressed willingness to meet and talk further in Dedoplitskaro. Denisenko said she welcomed the idea, although Roma as a rule are cautious of outsiders, some of whom in the past have promised monetary assistance which did not materialize. The NGO, Civic Integration Foundation (ICF) was the compiler of many of the interviews in the 2008 ECMI report and could be helpful in arranging future meetings.

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